Roger Caillois

THE MYTH OF THE UNICORN

We are pleased to offer our readers an unpublished article by Roger Caillois, a posthumous text which takes its place alongside his other studies on the myth and the imaginary. The octopus, the praying mantis and the fulgora in the real world led Roger Caillois to reflections similar to those which he exposes here relative to the narwhal and the imaginary unicorn. The importance of the unicorn in the author's work comes from the relationship established by the narwhal's tusk between two squares on Roger Caillois' chess board: myth and dissymmetry.* (Editor's note).

The problem of the unicorn seems to have been settled long ago. It is a wild white mare with a long twisted ivory horn on its forehead, whose real or supposed virtues are narrated, represented and proclaimed tirelessly by fables, the arts, heraldry and pharmacopoeiae.** Antiquity spoke of animals which were subsequently thought to be the possible forebears of the prodigious steed, although these animals had not one of its characteristics

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

* The reader should consult in particular the following works: *Le Mythe et l'homme*, N. R. F., 1938; *Cases d'un échiquier*, 1970; *La dissymétrie*, 1973.

** Certain aspects of this study were already dealt with in an article published in *Le Monde*, December 24, 1976 (Editor's note).

other than the single horn. At the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century, and then during the Renaissance and up to the dawning of the nineteenth century, the unicorn was a favorite theme for sculpture and tapestry in the Christian world. Its horn is vainly identified with the single tooth of the narwhal, a rare Arctic cetacean of giant proportions.

Except for the horn, there is no connection between the myth of the unicorn and the tusk of the non-legendary cetacean which is fabulous in its own right. The composite animal, whose appearance is part equine and part caprine, belongs to history and esthetics. I have tried to elucidate its essential characteristics and to define the different directions in which fantasy has taken it.

As for the long and slender spiral tooth, which the medieval imagination shifted to the forehead, the only mystery is not that it is singular, but that, in reality, it lies beyond man's ken. He can do no more than note, as I have tried to do, that this is one manifestation among an infinitude of others of a constant law of the universe from which not even man escapes. At every level the universe needs equilibrium for its stability and unbalance for its development. At every level as well, from the subatomic particle to the most complex organisms, from crystals to climbing plants to the hemisphere of the human brain containing the seat of man's symbolic faculties, the left side is almost always favored. Despite appearances, the supremacy of the right hand is a consequence of this due to the crossing of principal nerves in the cerebellum. Here is not the place to explain the laws of totality of which this one is an integral part and to which it is also subject. This study can only recognize them and perhaps explain their mechanisms, already a noteworthy privilege which probably distinguishes man.

I have returned the myth of the unicorn to its era and its setting. [As for] the mystery, truly inaccessible, of the narwhal's upper left canine, I can only define it and note it. Perhaps this is a characteristic of the two epochs, [that of the unicorn and of the narwhal, of myth and of science]* simply a passage from one enigma to another and from legend to absolute enigma. An

* Words in brackets were added by the editor to the author's original manuscript.

ivory tooth serves as connection. Like the universe, history is characterized by continuity.

In the mythical bestiary, the unicorn seems to be an animal totally set apart. This white mare with a twisted horn on the forehead is not especially implausible. There are many other creatures, from the nasicorn beetle to the rhinoceros, who also have a single frontal horn. Nor is the unicorn like the siren, the sphinx or the harpy, a composite of human and animal; even less so is it an anatomical monster like the centaur with its four hooves and two arms, or an animal composition like the chimera or the dragon. Moreover, the unicorn was believed to be real, although only the horn, the element which made in marvelous and then suspicious, was actual.

In brief we are dealing with an imaginary but nevertheless plausible animal, except for the ivory shaft on its forehead, which actually is the tusk of a veritable cetacean. This is the originality of the unicorn in the zoology of myth.

Unicorns from Elsewhere

The traditional appearance of the unicorn is limited to medieval Christianity; but it appears in other places, much earlier, although under different, not to say unrecognizable, forms. It will do no harm to review them rapidly.

Scholarship quickly learned that a legendary animal designated by a term equivalent to the word unicorn was already known in very ancient times. The animal in question, true enough, never appears in the form under which it has been known since the Christian Middle Ages. But a piece of Iranian pottery from the first millennium before Christ already represents a single-horned quadruped, although short and stocky. Greek and Latin authors describe the unicorn (*unicornis*) as a horse, a stag, a wild ass or a pig. The best known text is that of Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (VIII, 31). "In India another wild animal is hunted—the unicorn, its body like a horse, its head like a stag, its feet like an elephant and its tail like a boar. Its lowing is deep; a long black horn grows from the middle of its forehead. It is said that it cannot be captured alive." Before him, in *Indica*, Ctesias, the physician of Cyrus then of Artaxerxes II

Mnemon, had also located the unicorn in India. He described it as a very rapid silvestrian ass with a white coat, blue eyes and purple head. On its forehead it had a horn one cubit in length, whose lower section is white, the middle black and the tip purple. Indians of the highest classes drank from its horn, decorated with strips of gold at regular intervals. This immunized them against poisons and spasms, causing them to vomit poisoned food which they might have swallowed. In *The Life of Apollonios of Tyane* (III, 1), Philostratus confirms that only kings drink from cups made from a unicorn's horn; for then they do not suffer if they are wounded and can go through blazing fire without being burned.

The shape of the animal varies: at times it appears as a fish, then a dragon or a beetle.

In Persia, the unicorn is the *total animal* of the *Bundahish* (Ch. XIX). A three-legged ass living in the middle of the ocean, it has six eyes, nine mouths, two ears and one horn. It is as large as Mount Alvand. Its single horn is hollow and like gold. A thousand branches grew from it, large or small, appropriate for the camel, the ass or the cow. With this horn the animal dissolves and eliminates all evil corruption coming from harmful creatures. Its tiniest movement or softest cries have cosmic effects. Its excrement is grey amber.

According to the Talmud, the unicorn is also a colossal animal. It could not fit in the ark and escaped the Flood by being tied to the outside of the vessel.

It is apparent that this word denotes any animal of fantastic proportions and growing a single horn. This latter quality is not even always guaranteed or specified. In the Bible, in fact, the unicorn is a monstrous creature, related to Behemoth or Leviathan. The words *monoceros* or *unicornis* used to translate the Hebrew word allow for a wide margin of interpretation.

In classical China in a very different context under the name *K'i-lin*, the unicorn, along with the phoenix, the dragon and the tortoise, is one of the four beneficent animals listed in the *Li-ki*. As such it is highly venerable. It is described as being of the following form: the body of a stag, the tail of a cow, the hooves of a horse, a back of five colors and the belly yellow, a single horn of flesh. It does not walk on living plants. The

length of its life is normally a thousand years. It appears at the birth of good emperors and great sages. The first of its epiphanies took place in the garden of the Yellow Emperor. Two unicorns lived in the capital of the Emperor Yao. A unicorn appeared to the mother of Confucius while she was pregnant with him. According to another version, [the animal] was brought to her by the spirits of the Five Planets; [it] had the body of a cow, scales of a dragon and a horn on its head. The mother of Confucius tied a braided knot to the horn of the favorable animal who remained two nights and then left. The scene is frequently pictured, particularly in the *Sheng Chu-Tu*, a life of Confucius published in the eighteenth century. There the unicorn resembles a large armored dog, a sort of large-scale armadillo with a broad tail flattened vertically. A variant of the same legend collected by Wilhem, noted that the animal bore a jade plaque on which could be read, "Son of Mountain crystal, when the dynasty will be extinguished, you will command like an emperor, although without the signs of power." Just before the death of Confucius, an accident occurred. A unicorn was wounded by hunters. Han-Yu, a disciple of the philosopher, said, "The body of a stag with a horn of flesh—this must be a celestial monster boding evil." Confucius came to examine the animal and answered weeping, "It is a unicorn," that is, the favorable animal *par excellence*. The one, no doubt, whose fateful influence kept the exceptional sage alive.

In the *Manuel de zoologie fantastique*,[1] J. L. Borges cites a later fable relative to Gengis Khan. One of the advance guards of the army with which he intended to conquer India "spotted in the wilderness an animal 'like a stag, with a horn on its forehead and a green coat' who came up to them and said, 'The hour has come for your lord to return to his land.' One of the Chinese ministers of Gengis when consulted explained that the animal was a *chiotouan*, a variety of *k'i-lin*. For four winters the great army had been battling in western regions. Heaven, tired of seeing men spilling blood, had sent this warning. The emperor abandoned his bellicose projects."

The unicorn also distinguishes the innocent, whom it respects,

[1] French translation, Paris, 1970, p. 176.

from the guilty, upon whom it falls, without the use of its horn which is only a kind of wart.

Skepticism with regard to the unicorn, or at least with regard to the awesome powers associated with it, progressed decisively with the experimental method employed ultimately by Ambroise Paré. In China it seems, logic alone arrived at the same result, the only difference being that the reasoning touches the very existence of the animal rather than the miraculous influence which it bears. For the strictly rational part, the argument, less rigid, is nevertheless practically identical. How can so rare an animal, about which no one is in agreement, provide the pharmacy shops with such a considerable amount of remedies? The Chinese demonstration repeats: how, faced with a unicorn, can one be sure of identifying it with certainty? Here is the reasoning of Han-Yu who lived in the eleventh century, i.e., more than a half millennium before the European surgeon.

> "It is universally recognized that the unicorn is a supernatural being which brings good luck. This is proclaimed in the ritual odes, recorded in the annals, widely mentioned in biographies, notices and other similar works. Even peasant women and very young children know that the unicorn is a favorable omen.
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> "But this creature is not one of our domestic animals; it cannot always be found in the world. Its appearance, too, evades classification. It is not like a horse or a cow, a dog or a pig, a wolf or a stag.
>
> "Under these conditions, even if one were to find oneself faced with a unicorn, it would be difficult to know that it truly was one. Horned animals, we know, are cows; animals with manes, we know, are horses. The dog and the pig, the wolf and the stag—we know what each of these is. There is only the unicorn which we are unable to recognize.
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> "But if we cannot recognize the unicorn, it is completely natural that we eventually think of it as harmful.
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> "In fact, however, whenever a unicorn appears, there is always an accomplished sage nearby; it is for the sage that the unicorn appears. And an accomplished sage is certain to recognize the unicorn and knows perfectly well that a unicorn can only bring good luck.

"Therefore we can say that what makes a unicorn a unicorn is its virtue and not its outward aspect. If it were to appear without waiting for a sage to be present to recognize it, would it not be natural to consider it an evil omen?"

The Unicorn in the Christian West

1. Medicine

In the Christian West, whether feudal or humanist or courtly, there exist two quite distinct themes. In my opinion they are found together only by chance, simply because of a coincidence, if not to say of a play on words or a too-hasty translation. In the first place is the legend of the anti-venefic and anaesthetic prophylactic power of the horn of the unicorn taken as a universal antidote; secondly is the myth of the white mare with the single twisted horn which can only be captured by a virgin. I have never been able, myself, to perceive the slightest connection between the two other than the narwhal's tusk, in one case an expensive panacea and in the other the marvelous appendage of a quasi-supernatural animal, manifestly more emblematic than real and about whose therapeutic powers no one seems to be concerned. On the one hand there is an efficacious substance, even when ground or dissolved, which can act, if necessary, by its mere presence or by its proximity. On the other there is a mysterious beast, semi-divine, at the very least a theological and moral symbol, but whose preventive or curative powers remain pertinaciously unknown. I can see only one connection between the cycle of superstition and that of fables: the real tusk of the narwhal (*monoceros...*) and the young mare to whom, for lack of knowledge of her true origins, [it] has been attributed [in order to form] the unicorn, *unicornis* in Latin, a literal translation of *monoceros*, "with a single horn", the word which Ctesias employed to denote the horned animal used by the inhabitants of India to protect themselves from poison, diseases, as well as assassins.

As an unfailing remedy the horn of the unicorn was extremely appreciated and very costly. Around 1600, a merchant on the Pont-Neuf sold water drawn from a basin in which a piece of unicorn horn soaked. [Such fragments] were worth up to ten

times their weight in pure gold. But that was not too much to pay, for the powers of the horn extended far beyond the strictly therapeutic domain.

The mysterious power of the animal made the horn priceless. The unicorn had the gift of detecting whatever had been altered, was impure, defiled or harmful. It destroyed all venom, routed every serpent. Poisoned wine became cloudy in a cup or goblet made of the horn of a unicorn. The handle of a knife made of the same substance sweated if the blade came into contact with meat to which had been added gall of leopard or some other mortal substance. Generally it sufficed to "touch" the suspicious nourishment with a fragment of the magic horn set at the tip of a silver handle.

Bertrand d'Astorg, who discusses these miraculous virtues in his work *Le mythe de la Dame à la Licorne*,[2] curiously feigns belief in the existence of the unicorn, no doubt for poetic purposes. Better, he insinuates with regard to the experiments of Ambroise Paré that the learned doctor had perhaps used for his experiments one of the numerous imitations whose production was encouraged by the price of the powder of unicorn horn or of water in which a horn fragment had macerated.

It is time at this point to turn to the *Discours de la Licorne* by Henri II's surgeon, today still a model of rigorous argumentation and from which the therapeutic part of the legend never recovered. The work appeared in 1579. The author is, in spite of everything, somewhat troubled by the daring of his undertaking. He barely knew the unicorn, other than from the allusions of the Bible and the few references which figure in the writings of Greco-Latin Antiquity. But this is more than sufficient to bewilder him. If the animal's appearance is quite variable, its origin is no less so. It can be found in India, in Ethiopia, in still unknown countries, in deserts. It is solitary and rare. It frequents inaccessible places. And Ambroise Paré concludes, "Who can prove that those people knew nothing of the truth and that they recounted only opinions and hearsay?" He observed that no unicorn ever appeared in the great processions of exotic animals in the amphitheater under Diocletian and Gordian. At

[2] Paris, 1963.

the most only the rhinoceros appeared, which Plutarch peremptorily affirms to be different from the unicorn.

But the unicorn horn is a common object. Ambroise Paré presumes that it is simply the *rohart's* tusk. This was the name given to all marine animals that were not fish, particularly the walrus. In fact, remarks the surgeon, the horns preserved at Strasbourg, in the Vatican, in Venice, at Saint-Denis and elsewhere have only a debatable resemblance to one another. The animals which commonly pass for unicorns generally have two horns, completely symmetrical, with the exception, however, of the *uletif* fish which has but one in the form of a saw, three feet long, flat, three and a half fingers wide, pointed on each side. It is commonly found along the coasts of Africa, particularly near Guinea. Nothing in common with the white mare with tapered horn, although several authors call it the "sea unicorn". Moreover, the simple fact that such a great abundance of horns is to be found in the apothecary shops shows amply that deception is at stake, for apothecaries would not be able to be so well supplied with the horn of an animal so extremely rare that its existence is problematic.

2. *Theology*

Having made this concession to theology, the learned doctor moves on to the experimental method. He shows that the water in which a fragment of the horn-panacea has soaked in no way affects scorpions, spiders and toads who move through it as often as they like. Toads live in it perfectly well, even though the fragment of horn was at times that of the basilica Saint-Denis, i.e. the horn belonging to the King, or a fragment bought from the merchants who sell it at the highest prices. Moreover, the horn does not sweat in the presence of poison; it attracts humidity, but only like any cold and polished object such as marble or a mirror. Likewise, doctors who have tried it share the same negative opinion. The masters of Antiquity, Galen and Hippocrates, make no mention of it, nor does Aristotle, who nevertheless knew of the existence of one-horned animals such as the oryx or Indian ass. If modern practitioners or scholars such as Christophe André, Rondelet, Duret and Charles IX's first doctor, Chapelain, decided to remain silent on

the virtues of the mysterious horn, although they did not believe in it, it is because belief in it is deep-rooted and widespread; and, concludes Ambroise Paré, not without malice, it does harm to no one "other than to the purse of those who believe much more in it than in the weight of gold".

To end his discourse, Paré likens the curative power of the unicorn horn to that of liquid gold, precious stones and a moose's hoof.

I have reconstructed the doctor's argument step by step, both for its remarkable methodological spirit as well as for the prudence he is obliged to manifest with regard to the Church. For parallel to this, although apparently with no relation at all, the figure of the unicorn entered Christian symbolism. Specialists in medieval art have attempted to establish the genealogy of the western unicorn beginning with Ctesias and proceeding by way of Isidore of Seville, who died in 636 after having written an encyclopedic work on animals. He did not forget to discuss the unicorn.

The unicorn, in fact, sheltered by the biblical references which served to authenticate it, is one of the allegorical animals of established exegetes and theologians, although its significance frequently remains ambiguous. According to Isidore of Seville, to capture a unicorn it must be lured by a consecrated virgin. Then it reposes its head in the lap of the young maiden who warms it with her caresses and takes it away to the palace of the kings.

It is through Honorius d'Autun that the indecisive animal of Antiquity acquires a place of honor in the Christian bestiary. He sees in it the very symbol of the Incarnation and, coincidentally, of purity. "The unicorn represents Christ, and the horn which it bears in the middle of its brow symbolizes the invincible force of the Son of God. He rested on a Virgin's breast and was taken captive by hunters. In the same way hunters capture the unicorn using a trap of sweetness and purity. The allegory signifies that Christ took on human form in the bosom of Mary and that he consented to give himself over to those who sought him."[3] In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the legend

[3] Quoted by Marguerite Charageat, "La chasse à la licorne et le décor de la

becomes more complex. The hunter pursuing the unicorn became the Angel Gabriel, and the young maiden who makes possible its capture the Virgin Mary. The fable thus combines the Annunciation and the Incarnation.[4] It sets the scene in the "closed garden" set off by a fence (*hortus conclusus*) in which the Virgin is confined. The scene of the unicorn's capture becomes also a classic representation of the purity of Mary and of the birth of Christ. The hunter is frequently accompanied by four hounds who form two pairs and which represent mercy, truth, justice and peace.

Christ himself as *unigenitus* is likened to the unicorn, *unicornis*. The Apocalypse even assigns him a white steed as mount which could be symbolically transformed into the unicorn.[5]

Even under his human form, Christ is accessible only to those who love him and allows himself to be discovered only by these (*Speculum de mysteriis Ecclesiae*). The image of the young maiden taming the wild animal is frequently represented in manuscripts.

Not everyone is in agreement with the identification of the unicorn with Christ or with the Church or even, on a more modest plane, with using it as a symbol of purity and sweetness. It continues to be seen at the same time as sly, cruel, or to the contrary as timorous and easily duped, sometimes overtly vulnerable and even diabolical. From the beginning, the symbolism of the unicorn hunt quickly became ambiguous. The young virgin exposes her bared breasts to the rebellious animal who will not allow itself to be tamed nor captured. But then the unicorn sucks milk from her breasts and allows her to seize it by its horn. From that moment it is captured.

It does more than simply give in to temptation; it is also cruel. It tosses its enemies in the air and devours them. In some versions, when surrounded on a high plateau where it

chasse du parc de Raray", *Bulletin de l'histoire de l'art français*, 1937, p. 186, after Emile Mâle, *L'art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France*, 1919, p. 56.

[4] Marguerite Charageat, *art. cit.*, p. 186; after Léon Germain, *La Chasse à la licorne et l'Immaculée Conception*, Nancy, 1897.

[5] Barbier de Montault, *Traité de l'iconographie chrétienne*, Paris, 1890, t. II, p. 101. According to the same author, the unicorn served as symbol in particular for Saint Cyprian, Saint Firmin and Saint Justine. Cf. Marguerite Charageat, *art. cit.*, p. 188, n. 2.

has sought refuge from the hunters, it hurls itself into the abyss. Its horn, limber and flexible, softens its fall. Sometimes it hurls its enemies into the air and pierces them. It is as fierce and frightening as a lion. It can also seem naive. According to one fable taken over from a *Midrash*, the lion has only one means to overcome the unicorn. When the unicorn traps the lion against a tree, the latter readies himself. The unicorn charges to pierce the lion with its horn. The lion dodges, and the horn plunges into the trunk of the tree so that the unicorn cannot pull it out. Then the lion devours it. Men can capture it only by using a net or a trap. When captured, it refuses to eat and dies of melancholy. It loves doves. When it hears them cooing in a tree, it slips under the lower branches and sticks its horn up among them until a bird lights on it.

There is another means of capturing it besides taming it with the help of a chaste young girl. A boy is dressed in girl's clothing. The unicorn comes and rests its head on the boy's lap and dies immediately. The young man then has only to saw off the horn.

St. Basil, however, is categorical. The unicorn is the servant of Hell. "Beware the unicorn, that is to say the demon. For it brings evil to men and is clever at provoking them."

The same ambiguity is present in sacred and satirical images. Within one year of one another, the *Explanatio Imaginum* of Scaliger contains an engraving representing a unicorn as a symbol of the Spirit inspiring a pope (Cologne, 1570) and the *Auslegung der Figurer* (1569) of Paracelsus pictures a mocking unicorn who uses his horn to knock off the tiara of another pontiff.

It is said that Torquemada always had a unicorn horn close at hand to protect himself from evil spells. Wolfram von Eschenbach, in his *Parzival* (IX, lig. 1404-1501) recalls that the unicorn possesses "the marvelous gift for recognizing virgins who have remained pure". He adds two otherwise unmentioned details: "the heart of the miraculous animal is placed on a King's wound to heal it, and he can take advantage of the same occasion to acquire the power to extract from its forehead the carbuncle stone which grows beneath its horn".

3. The profane fable and Renaissance art

As we have noted, theology, patristics and a variety of superstitions are combined in the legend, sometimes even in the symbolism of a neo-Platonic descent. The emblem LXXXIX of the *Symboligraphia sive de arte symbolica* of Jacobus Boschins represents a unicorn leaning over a lake to stare at its reflection. The reflected horn seems to be aimed straight at its heart. The motto, obligatory in this highly ordered genre, reads, "*De moy, je m'épouvante*" ("I am terrified of myself"). It seems to me that this is a perfect commentary on the fundamental ambivalence of the unicorn, caressing and ruthless, solitary, inspiring and cruel, naive and infallible.

C. G. Jung, who compiled much data in his work *Psychology and Alchemy*,[6] was concerned only with the universality of the unicorn without analysing or detailing the variety of the animal's manifestations. For him, it represents the Mercury of spagyric art and in fact appears frequently in the treatises which explain it faced with a stag or a lion, [at] weddings or in combats of which it is difficult to extract a great deal since these oppositions or alliances are both unvaried and necessarily esoteric with their systems of labyrinthine-drawn metaphors.

The fable of the unicorn, apart from its theological development, is almost entirely an outgrowth of a feudal atmosphere, of courtly love, of respect for woman, of refined pleasures, of a taste for music and poetry. The series of tapestries in the Cluny Museum bears witness to this. They associate it to refinement in the arts which interest the various senses. The theme of the chase is likewise aristocratic. Moreover, we know that courtly love is often harmonized quite well with a refined sensuality.

Whence comes the quite striking opposition between the western unicorn which appears at the end of the Middle Ages and all those others scattered throughout the rest of the world. In fact, the figure of the lordly unicorn does not survive the world of *châteaux*. It flourishes, however, up to the end of the eighteenth century, but in a purely profane form. It is

[6] French translation, Paris, 1970.

represented proudly in marble at the top of monumental pyramids as well as in the Borromeo Gardens at Isola Bella (late seventeenth century), ridden by Eros, god of love, or surrounded by dogs on the gates of the park of the *château* of Raray which opens out on the forest.

Similarly, to cite one last example, in the so-called "secret" garden of Caprarola, a pair of unicorns are ridden by two nymphs. We know that Alexander Farnese is reputed to have been the inspiration for at least their general conception.

The unicorn now plays no more than an ornamental role with an allegorical resonance, just as it continues to be a feature of coats-of-arms where each of its attitudes retains a definite meaning. It is only after the union of England (the lion) and Scotland (the unicorn) that the two heraldic animals bear the arms of the United Kingdom. Sometimes in painting the animal is seen associated with magicians, but this is only a fantasy of symbolist and pre-Raphaelite artists with no precise significance. The famous picture by Gustave Moreau is an admirable illustration of this.

The legends proper to the unicorn, the union of the maidens' mare and the narwhal's tusk in the royal treasuries, did not survive the culture which gave them birth. Perhaps we have not sufficiently distinguished in the western unicorn cycle the various aspects which it contains—the superstition of the prophylactic panacea, the theological symbolism, the intellectual or artistic developments, in any case strictly profane, which flowed out of the Renaissance spirit.

Located at the confluence of the first two of these is the use of the ivory of the narwhal's tusk as a precious and salutary substance; at the confluence of the second and third is the symbolism which affirmed itself quite early and which acquired a prodigious place in the universe of the imagination, wherever the forces of allegory or imagery, from painting to poetry, needed either a form or an image which is both elegant and significant, or a precious substance, durable but capable of being worked. From this arose a vast creation extending from jewelers' masterpieces to the promises and enigmas of dreams. Creature of candor, never of leniency, touchstone of innocence and of poison, candid and perverse, it is both victim and ma-

gician. Later, in fact, it will willingly accompany Circe in nineteenth century paintings.

Unicorn horns and narwhals' tusks remained for a long time ardently coveted rarities. The Danes made a trade of them, but the traders they supplied are scrupulously silent as to their origin. They are numbered among the most sought-after objects in the world. In this respect they are even listed in the *Littré* which gives two examples. The first is that of Philippe de Commynes who, in describing the plundering of the goods of Piero de' Medici, estimates a complete horn to be worth 6 or 7000 ducats; the second, taken from the *Histoires* of Agrippa d'Aubigné, indicates that the most precious loot from the sacking of certain villages was a unicorn horn valued at 80,000 écus. These are not the only testimonies. In the sixteenth century, the margraves of Bayreuth owned four large unicorn horns. In 1559 the Venetians vainly offered the fabulous sum of 30,000 sequins for the longest of them. One of the horns was used as a remedy by the princely family. In the collection of the Elector of Saxony in Dresden, there was one which hung from a golden chain; it was valued at 100,000 écus.

The treatise of Ambroise Paré, the accounts of voyages in the Arctic seas and the descriptions of naturalists both destroyed belief in the powers of the unicorn's horn and also made known the narwhal and its single tusk, whose value only diminished once it was known that it came from a fish and not from a miraculous animal. Soon it was scorned. A. E. Brehm, in his popularising work, *La Vie des animaux*, relates the following typical anecdote. "In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Greenland Company sent several narwhal tusks to Moscow for sale to the czar. But the imperial physician forbade their sale, alleging that these were simply fish teeth and not at all unicorn horns. The legate had to return to Copenhagen with his merchandise, and there too he had the misfortune to be treated with derision. 'How could you have had so little tact and experience?,' an old trader asked him. 'You should have given two or three hundred ducats to the physician, and our teeth would have certainly been certified as coming from unicorns'."[7]

[7] A. E. Brehm, *La Vie des animaux*, French translation, Paris, 1868, p. 828.

A. E. Brehm also notes that unicorn powder could still be found in apothecary shops at the end of the eighteenth century and that in his time only the Dutch were still duping the Japanese and the Chinese with the fraudulent merchandise. In Europe, he states, unicorn horns were no longer of great value; they could be sold for scarcely more than 30 to 75 francs apiece. It hardly needs saying that the price has gone back up a great deal. This is because, apart from the beauty of the object and the quality of its ivory, the narwhal is an animal which is not only protected but in danger of extinction. Serious research undertaken in 1974, which dealt not with the narwhal but with a very closely related species, the beluga, estimated that the annual birthrate was 994 and that losses through capture, natural death or immersion under the ice were 1154 (A. W. Mansfield, T. G. Smith and B. Bock).[8] To this must be added the fact that only adult males have the single enormous tooth, and this is often broken off accidentally.

During the unicorn's age of glory and even after true provenance was known, it was the prime matter for many precious objects, both sacred and profane.

Among the most famous should be cited the one in the Habsburg treasury in Vienna which measures 2 m. 50, the one in the Grassi Museum in Leipzig at 2 m. 38, and the one in the treasury of St. Mark's in Venice at 2 m. 32. The one from the

[8] Communiqué accepted in March, 1974, by the sub-committee on small-scale cetaceans of the International Whaling Commission, Montreal, Quebec, 1-11 April, 1974. The official resumé of the communiqué reads: "Sixty-two narwhals (*Monodon monoceros*) were captured in the region of Pond Inlet, Baffin Island, in 1963-65 and examined. Growth layers are visible both in the exposed tooth as in the hidden one. The few remains of ingested food identifiable in the stomach are bits of squid and plankton. At birth the calf measures approximately 160 cm. in length and weighs a little more than 80 kg. The fully grown females reach a length of 400 cm. and a weight of 1600 kg. It is believed that calving takes place about once every three years. A conservative estimate of the population of Canada and north-west Greenland is approximately 10,000. Although the birth rate is unknown, it presumably is similar to what has been calculated for the most nearly related species, the beluga, i.e. approximately 9%. The maximum potential annual catch, based on the largest Canadian catch of 442 narwhals recorded in 1957, combined with that of 135 in Greenland and a loss due to drowning estimated at 50%, is approximately 1154. This exceeds the annual production estimated at 900." *The Fish Res. Board Can.*, vol. 32 (7), 1975. These figures are for Canada only, but would no doubt be similar for Iceland and the nothern coasts of Siberia.

treasury of Saint-Denis, now in the Cluny Museum after having belonged to the Cabinet des Médailles from 1893 to 1913, spans 2 m. 90. It is listed already in sixteenth century inventories as having been given to Charlemagne in 807 by Haroun el-Raschid, Caliph of Baghdad. Most frequently these were displayed in a vertical position and were luxuriously mounted on sculpted bases. They were also sometimes carved and decorated with long friezes twisting the entire length of the horn. The *Metamorphosis of Daphne* in the Grassi Museum, with her braided hair encircling the horn and gradually dispersing along it, can be considered a masterpiece of this type. It dates to the beginning of the nineteenth century.[9]

Art historians and museum catalogues also list ciboria, cups, goblets, tobacco boxes, reliquaries, a scabbard and a sword handle in the Vienna Kunstmuseum coming from the Habsburg treasury.[10] The unicorn is also used as decoration for little cases and ivory mugs: the foot is made of the hollow part of the narwhal tusk, and the body of the fabulous horse is carved on the object. The foot and the cover of a dish carved around 1600 by Nikolaus Birkenholtz or Nikolaus Kempf are decorated with a unicorn, while the dish itself is made of narwhal ivory. Guido Schönberger describes the same material combined with the same motif for both profane objects (tobacco boxes, pendants) and for religious objects (reliquaries and even episcopal crosses whose stem is a narwhal tusk and where the unicorn itself is represented on the very cross, 18th century). Royal scepters, [...,] the entire throne of the kings of Denmark preserved in the Rosenborg Palace in Copenhagen, certain profane objects such as canes whose handles [...] show scenes of the Passion, can all likewise be executed in narwhal ivory.[11]

These various objects, the majority of which, we might note, are intended for holding drink (or tobacco), thus have a double prophylactic value—from the material of which they are made and by the representation of the animal from which it was thought that the material came.

[9] Guido Schönberger, "Narwal-Einhorn, Studien über einen seltenen Werkstoff," *Städel Jahrbuch IX*, 1935-36, Frankfurt am Main, p. 208, fig. 219.

[10] Burgundian art around 1460. G. Schönberger, *op. cit.*, p. 237, fig. 247.

[11] See the illustrations to the cited study of G. Schönberger, p. 167-247, particularly figures 241, 247, 250 and 251.

Purely utilitarian objects made of narwhal tusks are extremely localized, precise and late. These are almost always harpoons for fishing from the north of Greenland dating from the nineteenth century. Naturally the unicorn is not represented here. I would hazard the following hypothesis to explain their relatively recent date. They appeared at a period when the narwhal tusk had lost its superstitious value and consequently its market value and when traders no longer were sending emissaries to collect them.

The Narwhal

The narwhal's entry into zoology was slow and laborious. For a long time it was called the "sea unicorn", the aquatic replica of the fabulous animal. At times it was confused with the sawfish. The descriptions multiplied, overlapped, diverged, contradicted one another. Cuvier gives a careful resume of their barely profitable progress in his work, *De l'histoire naturelle des cétacés.*[12] Apart from its single protuberance, the animal raises at least two problems which nourish the polemic. Is it a fish or a mammal? Is its tusk a horn or a tooth? And also, what is its purpose?

The first work to deal with the narwhal is no doubt that of Isaac de La Peyrère, *Relation du Groenland*, published in Paris in 1647, republished in Amsterdam in 1731, amended and enlarged. In the interval there appeared the works of Claus Worms (1655), Bartolinus (1688), Reisel (1702), John Monck (1704), Tuchonius (1706) and Larren (1707). Apparently, once it had been discovered, this singular cetacean repeatedly attracted the attention of travelers and scholars. Tulpius, a Dutch doctor who saw a beached narwhal near the Isle of Maja in 1648, provided a first image of the cetacean which was then copied more or less faithfully. The horn was 9 feet long (about 3 meters) and the body 20 feet. Much later scholars asked themselves if this were a horn or a tooth. Point of doubt. It is a tooth, to be exact the upper left canine, two to three meters in length. Rochefort,[13] for example, explains with no difficulty

[12] Paris, 1836, "Monodon monoceros," p. 230 and ff.
[13] *Histoire naturelle des Antilles*, p. 184 and ff., cited by Cuvier, *ibid.*, p.

why there is only one. "It should not be surprising if these fish [sic] have but one of these long teeth because the material needed to produce another is entirely used up to form this first one of such prodigious length and breadth that it would suffice for a hundred teeth."

Andersen, who observed a beached narwhal on a bank of the Elba in 1736, identified it conclusively as a species of whale.[14] However, the dissymmetry of the single tooth continued to trouble naturalists. They cited the different treatment of the bulbs, the forms of the alveoli and all sorts of other observations which are in no way explanations. Cuvier skirts the issue with an evident counter-truth. (Is he here repeating Rochefort? The text is ambiguous on this point.) "The narwhal naturally has two tusks; and if the second one, the one on the right side, does not always develop, this is by accident, for it sometimes can be as large as the first one." The adverb "*naturally*" is extremely audacious, and the expression "*by accident*" is hardly appropriate for the quasi-totality of male specimens, to such a point that we can legitimately ask if there is not confusion here with the female of the species who in fact does have two canines, but much, much shorter.[15] Clarifications were added some thirty years later by Van Beneden and Gervais[16] on the exclusive privilege of a single canine, *always the same*, in the male. The right tooth remains sequestered in the maxillary, like the two teeth of the female. To the contrary the bulb of the left tooth continues "to grow during the entire life of males, which explains the considerable development which it can attain. The ivory of the rudimentary tooth, or the two teeth in the case of females, is coated with cement like that of the left tooth in males."

[The rudimentary tooth,] like the two in the female, remains hidden in the maxillary where it occasionally gives rise to a slight protuberance, not exceeding 20 centimeters.

In any case, if the horn of the unicorn gradually became less

232, first gives a fanciful representation of a "sea unicorn" and then describes the narwhal of the Arctic seas.

[14] *Histoire du Groenland*, in Cuvier, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

[15] Cuvier, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

[16] *Ostéographie des cétacés*, Paris, 1868-1880, p. 529-530.

accepted as a universal antidote, the prestige of the animal itself remained vigorous, and its existence, however hypothetical, is not at all contested. In a work on quadrupeds by Doctor John Johnston, whose English translation was published in London in 1678, there appear no less than eight engravings representing different types of unicorns. These are essentially pictures of onagers or antelopes to which the artist simply added a single horn in the middle of the head. In fact, the horns of the oryx algazelle, which lives south of the Rio-de-Oro up to the Ethiopian border, were frequently sold by traders as unicorn horns. Actually this antelope is almost white, and travelers remarked that it gallops holding its head high like a horse. Moreover, its horns are almost straight and filled with deep grooves, transversal and not twisted, however.

Dr. Johnston nevertheless attempted to explain the uniqueness of the unicorn horn. He cited in particular the *Rangifer*, which has three horns according to Claus Magnus, and which lives in the forests of Poland, Sweden, Lapland and near the pole. In 1533, three specimens were sent to King Gustav. They were never found again, neither the three original ones nor their descendents (pl. XXXVII; the horns are branched). He refers also to the Tarandus or Busse (pl. XXXVI) whose two horns are united and braided before separating off to both sides in large antlers. This animal is found in the same countries as the rangifer. These animals adapt their colors to the environment like chameleons and octopuses. It is therefore reasonable to assume that their horns have the same flexibility. For the unicorn, he concludes, "it is uncertain whether it is a Busse, a Turo or a Rangifer, but I have done everything I could to remain as close as possible to the truth" (p. 52). The latent argument, if I may venture to reconstruct it, is as follows: the unicorn has but one horn, but it is twisted, which shows that it results in fact from two horns merged into one. And so the power of the image, even in face of reality itself, is often more persuasive than the power of the simple truth.

Cuvier agrees. In fact, female narwhals generally have two equally developed canines, although greatly reduced, while in the male the right canine remains enclosed in its socket. Dissymmetry triumphs in a hyperbolic fashion and, it must be

noted, in a manner as enigmatic as it is sumptuous. Sumptuous, for the long and slender spiral of ivory growing up from the left side is a prodigy which has never ceased to enchant those intrigued by nature's miracles. Enigmatic, for why is there such a striking dissymmetry which is so consistently in favor of the left side? And why is this helix no less consistently oriented to the left; to such a degree that, in those exceptional males with two canines of lesser dimensions, each of them, instead of being twisted in reverse or mirror symmetry, are equally laevogyrous.

No one, not at that time nor even today, seems to have been concerned with such questions. Nevertheless, the word narwhal began to replace the term sea unicorn. This word, derived from the Icelandic, appeared in French for the first time toward the middle of the seventeeth century, no doubt in La Peyrère. It comes from the old Scandinavian, *na-r* meaning cadaver and *whal*, whale. It was imagined in fact that this animal fed on carrion, and for this reason one of the earliest Icelandic legal codes expressly forbade eating its meat. However, the narwhal owes its name more than likely to its coloring. Below it is light grey spotted with darker blue areas, reminiscent of the marbled appearance of human bodies which have been immersed in water for a long time.

The upper left canine of the cetacean protrudes horizontally from its mouth which is not much larger than a hand. It feeds primarily on plankton and shrimp. In vain it has been sought to determine the purpose of the giant tusk. According to the most plausible hypothesis, the animal uses it to break the ice in order to allow himself and his family to have access to the open air which the species needs for respiration. Such a supposition, however, enjoys nothing resembling unanimity, all the more in that it would seem to be justified only by the number of broken tusks. In any case, the animal, despite its uniqueness, does not seem to have been the source of the fables.

These are rooted exclusively in a non-existent quadruped, a legendary animal of coats-of-arms and tapestries, medals and paintings, ornament for a universe of refined civilisation, source of a cult of virginity, of damsels in tall hats and brocaded gowns. A solitary steed who inhabits the forests, rapid and

fierce, so mild that it can be drawn only with the help of a young girl whose chastity is beyond reproach, but capable of piercing her mercilessly with its ivory horn if she fails even once in her purity. This is the description given in legends.

Must it be said that the only thing retained of the polar cetacean is the spiral tusk which the legends seem to have borrowed from it? No doubt artists and poets had seen the sumptuous lances displayed in the treasuries of the princes of those times without ever knowing, like everyone else of their era, the true provenance of the objects.

All available make-believe was monopolized by the fictitious horse. The sea monster, although equally filled with anomalies, had no such success. How can this difference in treatment be explained?

* * *

The legend of the unicorn is pure enchantment, at times a simple error which experience suffices to dispel (detection of poisons by the power of the horn), then a romanesque parable expressing in an emblematic form a truth of the moral order valid within a given culture (here, the special value attributed to feminine chastity). In both cases the singular horn (in both senses of the adjective) seems the instrument which can uncover a fearful and hidden defilement. It can even serve, if such be necessary, as sanction.

It is set in an axial position on the forehead of the magic animal. It thereby obeys the law of sagittal symmetry which in nature rules for the horn of the rhinoceros, the crest of the bird, the nostrils and the sex of vertebrates, and, if we move on to the sea world, the toothed saw of the sawfish or the tapering sword of the swordfish. These various organs manifest a symmetry which is the only one remaining in higher animals. It notes or prolongs the line which separates the body in two identical vertical halves in such a way that exteriorly one seems the reflection of the other. On the contrary, where the mystery is actual, and not merely made up, is in the violation caused by the narwhal's left canine to the fundamental morphological symmetry of the majority of the animal kingdom: a break-down of the sagittal plan and consequently of lateral symmetry. There is not another example on this scale in all of nature. The giant

tusk introduces a disharmony practically inadmissible in the natural order and because of this anomalous scandal can claim to derive from the category of the fantastic properly and correctly speaking. The unicorn, on the other hand, is simply marvelous, that is fairy-like, and as such was quick to find itself a captive of the fairies' dens. By resetting the horn in the center, the imagination resorbs the defect, or at least evades it.

If the upper left canine of the narwhal, which is even spiralled to the left, violates immutable ordinary regularity, at the same time it declaims and proclaims one of those rare prescriptions both capital and secret (inexplicable to man) which govern the universe—the pre-eminence of the left which includes the finest particles of matter up to the lobes of the human brain, by way of the structure of crystals and the direction in which plants climb and seashells turn. There are few phenomena which escape it. At every decisive point it violates the symmetry which no doubt ensures a necessary but static equilibrium and which forms as such a block for the evolution toward an increasing complexity and a more fertile liberty for living beings of every kind and for the imagination itself.

The narwhal's tusk unveils in a spectacular manner the existence of a veritable mys*tery—that of the presence and the fecundity of cosmic dissymmetry. It provides an example which is at the same time marginal and excessive, rendering the charming and frivolous legends derisory. It is not astonishing that human fantasy, inconsistent, bound to a certain period and to specific customs, scorned the narwhal's tooth or, by taking it over and transforming it into the horn of the unicorn, restored it to ordinary symmetry, for harmonious and decorative purposes, and thereby deprived it precisely of that profound singularity which bound it to the enigma of the fundamental forces of the universe.

† Roger Caillois
(*Académie française*)